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SUBJECT: NATIONAL TEACHERS UNION: HANDING OUT HUMMERS WHILE  
ROME BURNS

REF: (A) MEXICO 2948 (B) MEXICO 2877

11. Summary: In recent weeks Mexico has experienced growing discontent among the state level Locals of the National Teachers Union (SNTE) against the &Alliance for Quality Education8 agreement signed this past May between the GOM and the union,s national leadership (Ref A). The goal of the agreement is to improve the quality of public school education by upgrading teacher skills, increasing teacher professionalism and investing more heavily in improving school infrastructure. Dissatisfaction over how the GOM and SNTE planned to accomplish these goals has resulted in protests marches, strikes that have closed schools for extended periods and increasingly large demonstrations in nearly half of Mexico,s 31 states. In some cases these protests became so unruly that military force was used to contain them. The seriousness of this labor/education crisis notwithstanding, in mid-October the president of the SNTE handed out 59 Hummer SUV,s as gifts to the leaders of loyal union Locals during the close of a national union conference.

The estimated value of these vehicles is USD 40,000 each. The Hummers were apparently purchased using union funds so, technically speaking, no laws were broken in their acquisition. Nevertheless, this blatant flaunting of union wealth at a time of fierce dissention within the SNTE sparked a massive public outcry. In response to this sharp public uproar the SNTE said that it would raffle off the vehicles and use the proceeds to help schools in poor districts. The SNTE leadership,s inability to anticipate the public reaction to handing out luxury vehicles as party favors has been pointed to by labor observers and opposition politicians as an example of how the GOM allows allied unions to put their special interests above those of the country. Some even speculate that the SNTE,s ill-advised action could endanger the first serious GOM effort at education reform in many years. End Summary.

#### BACKGROUND ON PROTEST OVER EDUCATION REFORM

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12. In recent weeks Mexico has experienced numerous large-scale protests by dissidents within the state level Locals of the National Teachers Union (SNTE) against the &Alliance for Quality Education8 (ACE). The ACE (Ref B) is an agreement signed this past May between the GOM and the SNTE,s national leadership whose goal is to improve the quality of public school education by upgrading teacher skills, generally increasing teacher professionalism and investing more heavily in improving school infrastructure. The discontent has resulted in protests marches, strikes that

have closed schools for extended periods and increasingly large demonstrations in nearly half of Mexico's 31 states. In early October the protests in the state of Morelos became so unruly that military force was used to clear blocked roads and disburse violent demonstrators.

13. The dissidents within the Locals assert that they are protesting against an agreement imposed on them by the union's national leadership and the GOM without their consent. In addition, the dissidents claim they are seeking to defend such legitimate labor rights as the right to freely determine the leadership of their state level Locals. These noble assertions notwithstanding, numerous press reports cite the GOM, the SNTE national leadership and even statements by the dissidents themselves which indicate that the protestors are really seeking to undo the provisions of the ACE that would require prospective teachers to take an entrance examine for hiring and promotions and which would prohibit current teachers from selling their positions or passing them on as an inheritance. In addition to their opposition to the ACE the dissidents have also called for the removal of SNTE national President, Elba Ester Gordillo Morales. Gordillo is a controversial figure in Mexican organized labor and politics who is often accused of being more interested in furthering the interests of a corrupt union than in dealing with the many problems facing the country's public school system.

#### SNTE NATIONAL CONFERENCE BECOMES AN EARLY CHRISTMAS

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14. Partly as a result of these protests the SNTE union leadership held an Extraordinary National Council two-day meeting in the northern border state of Sonora in mid-October to discuss the circumstances of the ongoing labor/education crisis. The meeting was attended by the heads of SNTE state level Locals and assorted members of their staffs. Also in attendance were the members of the union's National Executive Committee and a mixed group of high-level members of the New Alliance Party (PANAL). PANAL is the political party founded by SNTE President Elba Ester Gordillo in 2006 when, to some extent, she broke with the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), Mexico's former party.

15. The main focus of the meeting was a reaffirmation of the SNTE leadership's commitment to fully implement the terms of the ACE agreement reached with the GOM's Secretary of Public Education (SEP). This commitment included a reaffirmation of the decision to hire prospective teachers via a process of competitive entrance examinations and to prohibit current teachers from selling their positions or bequeathing them as an inheritance (Ref A). The meeting was also used to discuss STNE budget proposals for education in 2009 (five billion pesos) and to report on the current state of the unions finances.

16. The report on the state of the union's finances provided the perfect note on which to close the council meeting. The council report firmly underscored that the finances of the SNTE were excellent and further highlight that point union president Gordillo presented the leaders of the state level locals with an early Christmas gift; all 59 of the state union leader received a brand new Hummer H-3 sport utility vehicle. The purchase price of each vehicle was approximately USD 40,000 apiece. When handing out the Hummers Gordillo noted that although the vehicles were for model year 2009 they were the most basic showroom editions available. Elba Ester Gordillo was specifically quoted in several national newspapers as lamenting the fact that she was not able to have the vehicles armored at the time of purchase. Needless to say the recipients of the Hummers were duly impressed with their leader's generosity and were quoted, according to the press, as referring to her as

#### BLISTERING PUBLIC AND OPPOSITION PARTY REACTION

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¶7. The reaction of the public, press and members of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Mexico,s main opposition party was one of shock and outrage. No matter the source the reactions were the same: sheer disbelief! The near unanimous comments from every quarter of Mexican society expressed anger and condemnation that the SNTE would be handing out Hummers like party favors at a time when the country,s public school system was in crisis and rank and file teacher holding protests and occasionally violent demonstration throughout much of the country.

¶8. Mexican labor unions are used to being publicly criticized and as a rule they are rarely influenced by such denigration. SNTE president Gordillo is famous for her lack of concern over public opinion on issues related to the union or public education. This time, however, things were different. For whatever reason, within 48 hours of the close of the SNTE council meeting in Sonora, Gordillo and her top lieutenants were all back tracking in the press on the topic of the Hummers. SNTE Secretary General, Rafael Ochoa Guzman went to great lengths to repeatedly state that the Hummers were completely purchased with unions funds.

¶9. Gordillo herself quickly announced that the Hummers were not the personal property of the SNTE Local leaders themselves but rather the property of the union. She indicated that the vehicles had been purchased so that union leaders would have safe and reliable transportation to visit schools in Mexico,s more remote districts. She then announced that as a gesture of solidarity with the country,s poorest school districts the Hummers would be raffled off with the receipts going to help ten of these districts. Gordillo attempted to imply that the Hummers were never gifts but rather that they had always been intended as raffle prizes. There is no evidence to indicate that anyone in any

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part of Mexico accepted this claim at face value.

#### LABOR AUTONOMY TAKEN TO EXTREMES

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¶10. Mexico,s constitution guarantees the right of autonomy to labor unions to manage their internal affairs in any way they see fit. The purpose of this constitutional guarantee was to provide workers with protections for the right to freedom of assembly. Unfortunately, over time, union autonomy has been used to draw a veil over a variety of activities that might not always be considered ethical. In this particular case, the fact that the union paid for the Hummers with its own funds is something that it had every legal right to do. The union,s right to use its own funds for the purchase of SUVs was publicly affirmed by a GOM spokesman at the Secretary of Public Education (SEP).

¶11. Labor observers in the Mexican media pounced on the example of the Hummers as a perfect example of the corruption and moral bankruptcy that exists in the country,s organized labor movement. Labor leaders in Mexico frequently proclaim that union autonomy protects the rights of workers to manage their own internal affairs. Moreover, they regularly assert that labor autonomy does not mean an absence of accountability. What it does mean, they claim, is that they are answerable only to their fellow union members. If these assertions were ever really true, there is currently (again) no evidence to indicate that anyone in any part of Mexico accepts them at face value.

COMMENT

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¶12. Many labor observers and opinion makers in Mexico have expressed concern that the SNTE leadership,s excess in handing out SUV,s could have broader implications beyond internal union affairs. The idea of education reform has wide support across a broad spectrum of Mexican society and there is genuine. Given that dissident teachers across Mexico are protesting the reform effort embodied in the ACE, labor observers are concerned that public discontent towards them and now the SNTE leadership could undermine that reform initiative. Legally speaking, the SNTE leadership had every right to purchase the 59 Hummers and hand them out as gifts. However, being legal is a totally separate issue from public perceptions of what is proper or what is right. Mexico,s public education system is badly in need of reform and handing out luxury SUVs, even if they are the cheaper off the floor models, distracts from the efforts needed to make these reforms a reality. The leadership of the SNTE has not been held in high regard in Mexico for some time and its decision to sign off on the ACE could have been an opportunity to change its image and gain public support for education reform. It is very unfortunate that first the striking teachers and now the SNTE leadership itself have both put narrow special interests ahead of a much needed public good.

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